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AUTHOR	Meagher, Eileen M.
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ABSTRACT

One educator with much experience as a teacher and director of composition at a state university believes that academia simply has to have independent writing programs. Her conviction rests on two issues: the nature of the curriculum and the professional/psychological well-being of writing/rhetoric faculty. The process movement in writing pedagogy of the 1970s began to set composition faculty apart from literature-trained faculty. Now, with the introduction of the Internet and the information economy, the gap has become an unbridgeable chasm. The purpose of literature departments is to prepare students to read and analyze a specialized kind of print text, then to compose similar kinds of specialty texts. The purpose of writing programs is to prepare students to understand hypertext, to master the rhetorical abilities to analyze it, and to develop the new and complex skills to create it. Literature faculty believe there are two kinds of literacy--print literacy and illiteracy. Writing faculty believe that just as print literacy came after millennia of oral literacy, hypertext literacy has recently emerged and is already supplanting print literacy in the important ways that the world does business. Literature faculty do not allow composition faculty the significance of their pedagogy and scholarship--writing teachers are needed in departments for "housekeeping" skills, but not for any substantive contribution. The successful director of composition, the successful teacher of writing, the successful writing program coordinator, the successful writing center director, all are forced to play a lethal psychological and professional game, to be themselves and not be themselves at the same time. A way must be found to let English departments know, to let deans know, to let provosts and academic vice presidents know that the future of students' literacy lies in a vision unencumbered and translated into independent writing programs. (NKA)

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THE CASE FOR INDEPENDENT WRITING PROGRAMS

by Eileen M. Meagher

Paper presented at the SIG for Independent Writing Programs, CCCC 2000

Drawing from my own experience of 12 years as Director of Composition at a mid-sized state university; 20 years of initiating, developing a rhetoric/writing track at the MA level in the same institution; establishing a WAC program; writing numerous grants to fund professional development of adjunct staff; convincing deans of the need for computer lab for writing students and finally writing a grant for same; reading the many books that discuss rhetoric and writing programs, their staffing and administration; listening to the passionate discussions on listservs; attending numerous conferences and making presentations to the converted, I now believe and feel very strongly that we simply have to have independent writing programs. My conviction rests on two major issues: nature of our curriculum and the professional /psychological well being of writing/rhetoric faculty.

The process movement in writing pedagogy of the 70's began to set us apart from literature trained faculty. Since then, the gap has been getting wider. But with the introduction of the Internet and the birth of the information economy, the gap has become, in my opinion, an unbridgeable chasm. Writing and rhetoric programs now have a very different purpose from those of traditional English departments of literature. The purpose of departments of literature is to prepare students to read a

specialized kind of print text, analyze it, and compose similar kinds of specialty texts. The purpose of writing programs is to prepare students to understand hypertext, to master the rhetorical abilities to analyze it, and to develop the new and complex skills to create it. Literature and writing faculties are sharing less and less common ground (even in the view of such literary stalwarts as Robert Scholes and Jasper Neel).

Literature faculty believe that there are two kinds of literacy: print literacy and illiteracy. Writing faculty have come to understand that first there was oral "literacy" with its particular pedagogy, purposes, skills, and performances, that then a writing literacy began to emerge which overlapped oral literacy and which culminated in a print literacy which in turn, has dominated our notion of literacy for the last 500 years. Just as print literacy came after millennia of oral literacy, hypertext literacy has emerged in the last half of the 20th c. and is already supplanting print literacy in all the important ways that the world does business. Just as oral literacy will always be with us, so will print literacy, but clearly the dominant literacy is and will be hypertext literacy for the foreseeable future. Hypertext literacy, while containing elements of oral literacy and print literacy is a new literacy, not just a composite of oral, print, and visual literacies.

And just as the guardians of "oral literacy" fought the widespread use of writing and later print literacy (remember Plato's railings in writing against writing literacy for the masses), so the guardians of print literacy rail against the recognition of such a thing as hypertext literacy, not to mention its emerging centrality. Plato feared the loss of the human faculty of memory. Print guardians fear the loss of the mind's ability to engage in depth analysis. The mind which naturally works in an associative manner was forced and enabled by print to work in a manner unnatural to

it: the linear mode. Hypertext, on the other hand, operates by appropriating and synthesizing both the associative and linear modes, making effective use of all the powers of the mind: the ability to analyze, to imagine, to intuit, to create, to remember and to see and hear.

Why can't English departments as currently constituted - faculty trained in literature, a composition director who may or may not have a doctorate in composition studies, a host of adjunct faculty to teach freshman composition, and one or two or three creative writing faculty -- have both purposes? Not only are the purposes totally different, the philosophies of literature dominated departments are totally at odds with the philosophy of informed writing faculty. While writing faculty conceive of themselves as academic specialists/ professionals in the burgeoning new field of rhet/comp studies and are quite willing and glad to grant literature faculty their specializations, literature faculty with occasional exceptions (and these are too few to make any real difference), do not allow us the significance of our pedagogy and scholarship, do not see either as sufficiently worthwhile or substantive to spend department resources on. The vast majority of departments of English have always seen the teaching of writing as housekeeping work, continue to see it as such and show no signs of seeing it any differently. And in their view our scholarship cannot match the depth, standards, and prestige of literature scholarship. Indeed, I wager that your colleagues look upon composition studies and rhetoric studies just as mine do: our work lowers standards.

As long, therefore, as literature faculty have a majority of votes, as long as department heads are literature faculty, there can be no serious addressing of the programmatic/personnel concerns of writing programs. In fact, there will continue to be an active and a strong resistance to any effort to recognize rhetoric and composition studies as a discipline. That is not surprising, since after all, we

are the bread and butter of English and will continue to be as long as the status quo remains. We are needed for our housekeeping skills, but not for any substantive contribution. We are needed and not needed! In short, we try to do our work in a neurotic, unhealthy context.

And that brings us to the second issue: the professional and psychological well being of rhet/comp faculty and indeed also of literature faculty.

Because of the history of writing pedagogy as a ghetto concern in English departments, writing faculty with doctorates or training in composition studies (and rhetoric studies) find themselves in a classic double bind relationship with literature faculty. We know through repeated experience that our vision of an English Studies curriculum is not wanted, not appreciated, and most of all not understood by the faculty who control the vision, resources, and culture of English departments. Yet, we allow the monetary benefits of the composition program to be appropriated to fill and perpetuate literature lines. We continue to shoulder the vast bulk of work in English departments in relative silence (in "smoking" silence nowadays) because we want to be loyal, we don't want to hurt the literature program, we don't want to create ripples that might prevent us from being approved for tenure and promotion by our literature colleagues, and the thousand other excuses we brainwash ourselves with. We tend therefore to keep our vision to ourselves.

So we are becoming increasingly tired, cynical, and angry, tired because of the psychological burden of maintaining day in and day out, our professional self-respect and positive identity, cynical because deep in our bones we know that conditions are not likely to change on the inside in our professional lifetimes, despite the admonition of a few well meaning literature faculty to "just

be patient," angry because of the professional injustice perpetrated on us and the curricular injustice perpetrated on our students.

Why do we put up with such conditions? We are I'm afraid masochists! Like the abused spouse, we have grown accustomed to the abuse, we think we are helpless, that there is no alternative to the situation, we are thrown just enough crumbs and promises to seduce us into thinking that the abuser will change, and when all is said and done, well, let's face it, we love the abuser- the English department- it is our home, we know no other. What would it do without us, and what would we do without it?

The other side of the double bind is that it is too risky for us to work for, declare, or even envision independence. We would have to forge a home of our own in an unfriendly academic culture. Like the abused spouse who considers leaving, we would have to establish credibility without funds, without a home, without advocates, without assurance of success or so we think! And perhaps worst of all, we would risk the fury of literature faculty who cannot be expected to release their housekeepers without a bloody fight. They need the FTE we generate without which they cannot maintain or reproduce themselves. (A senior academic officer confided in me recently that when he encouraged such independence at his institution, he received death threats.) We dare not risk! And we become enablers of the injustice and abuse we rail against. If writing and rhetoric faculty are masochistic in allowing themselves to be abused and in enabling that abuse, then literature faculty who are cement deep in the status quo are perceived by us as sadists -- the perfect and natural complement to our own condition.

We are expending our precious energy in a nearly Orwellian task of doublethink-- telling ourselves that we should accede to the situation as it is while at the same time knowing very well that our literature colleagues are largely clueless about writing theory and history, rhetorical history and theory, literacy theory and history, culture theory and history, and the nature of the task ahead of us all in preparing our students rhetorically and ethically to shape and participate in the new information culture and economy. No wonder we are tired! Bertalanffy et al. write in *The Pragmatics of Human Communication*, "A person in a double bind situation is (therefore) likely to find himself punished (or at least made to feel guilty) for correct perceptions, and defined as "mad" or "bad" for even insinuating that there is a discrepancy between what he does see and what he 'should see'."

For example, the director of composition is expected to make sure that the writing program achieves its goals without even hinting that more trained comp faculty are needed, without asking for additional resources, without suggesting that a separate director is needed for the WAC program, without arguing that the writing center is not a temporary solution, without suggesting that specially trained faculty are needed to teach scientific and technical writing, without advocating for better pay and benefits for adjunct faculty, without impinging, in short, on the comfort zone of the department. The director is expected to do all of the above and much more, cheerfully, compliantly and gratefully! In other words, the "successful director of composition," the successful teacher of writing, the successful writing program coordinator, the successful writing center director, the successful WAC director, all are forced to play a lethal psychological and professional game, to be themselves and not be themselves at the same time. Bertalanffy argues

that to escape from such an unhealthy and dysfunctional relationship, one has to, like the abused spouse, get outside the box. We must become independent!

Of course, there is the occasional English department that professes to live happily with its internal contradictions! And indeed many of the leaders of our discipline are former literature faculty. But let's not fool ourselves! The vast majority of English departments are unhappy and unhealthy places for even the most successful among us. We have to step outside the box, to take all the risks that seem so threatening. Since there is little support at the local level for risk takers, that support must be created at national and regional levels.

Perhaps our senior members could help create the networks, the support groups/ agencies necessary to help us make transitions at the local levels. Let's have the voices of respected scholars in our field use national forums to speak to the necessity of independence. Let's have those writing departments currently enjoying independence help us find a way. Let's together find a way to let English departments know, to let our deans know, to let our provosts and academic vice presidents know that the future of our students' literacy lies in our vision unencumbered and translated into independent writing programs.

We owe as much to our professional lives, to our psychological health, to the integrity of the profession, to our students, and perhaps most of all to those newly minted Ph.D.s in rhetoric and composition studies. We owe them a productive and healthy inheritance.